

Fred Thompson, Who Championed Women in Track, Dies at 85

Fred Thompson with Ashley Armond, 8, before the Colgate Women's Games tryouts in 2000. He was the games' founding organizer and their director for 40 years. His track and field club in Brooklyn, the Atoms, has given hundreds of girls and young women a chance to compete.

Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

By **Robert D. McFadden**

Jan. 24, 2019



Fred Thompson, who founded a Brooklyn track club for girls and young women in 1963 and coached national and Olympic medalists as he championed the cause of female track-and-field athletes for a half-century, died on Tuesday at his home in Brooklyn. He was 85.

Lorna Forde, a former track star for Mr. Thompson, said the cause was complications of Alzheimer's disease.

A lawyer and former New York State assistant attorney general, Mr. Thompson founded the Atoms Track Club of Brooklyn in a Bedford-Stuyvesant community center, mostly out of frustration with New York City public schools that, for budgetary and other reasons, limited the participation of girls, but not necessarily of boys, in physical education and high school sports.

Mr. Thompson was also the founding organizer of the annual Colgate Women's Games, the nation's largest amateur track series for women. Since 1974, the games, open to girls and women from elementary school through college (and with a competitive division for women over 30), have attracted thousands of participants, mostly from East Coast states, to various venues from Boston to Virginia.

A former track star at [Boys High School](#) in Brooklyn and the City College of New York, Mr. Thompson inspired remarkable loyalty in his Atoms, which often had 40 to 50 members. Most were runners, some as young as 9, but most were teenagers who regarded him as a counselor, friend and father figure. He paid nearly all the expenses of the club, which was independent of schools or sponsors.

Early on, the Atoms practiced in community center hallways or in locked schoolyards (by scaling fences at twilight). But he eventually found a home for the club at [Pratt Institute](#) in Brooklyn.

His coaching combined sophisticated training techniques with one-on-one skill sessions. And beyond coaching, he demanded good grades and personal responsibility from his athletes.

“The Atoms doesn’t really stand for track,” he told The New York Times in 1978. “The Atoms stands for excellence in education, trying to better yourself in this society, and one way to do that is to go to college and get that piece of paper.”

For many Atoms, the club was a refuge from broken homes and lives of poverty, as well as a path to education and upward mobility. In time, despite financial and logistical obstacles and a lack of the public support that flows readily to football, basketball and baseball, the club became a symbol of inner-city success as its runners won regional, national and finally Olympic recognition.

Its stars included [Cheryl Toussaint-Eason](#), a silver medalist at the 1972 Munich Olympics in the 1,600-meter relay and a gold medalist at the Pan American Games; [Diane Dixon](#), who won Olympic gold in Los Angeles in 1984 in the 400-meter relay and was an 11-time national indoor champion; and [Grace Jackson-Small](#), the silver medalist in the 200-meter sprint at the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, South Korea. Mr. Thompson was an assistant coach of the United States track team in Seoul.

Many of the Atoms’ victories could not be clocked by stopwatches. In its first 15 years, the club produced 50 college graduates, a remarkable record given the economic status of their families. They became teachers, lawyers, nurses, psychologists, entrepreneurs — and mothers. “One’s a doctor now, and another runs a study program in a state college,” Mr. Thompson told The Times in 1979.

“But we’ve lost some, too,” he added. “We had a little girl we called Cricket who still holds the 100-yard dash record for 12- and 13-year-olds. But the streets got her. She stopped coming to practice. Another girl, a shot-putter named Diane, they found her dead from an overdose of drugs. I made all my girls go to her funeral. It wasn’t easy. They were crying. They took it hard. But I thought it was something they should see.”

The coach often sounded like a father, although he was a bachelor and had no children. “I’ve always been single,” [he told the Times sportswriter Gerald Eskenazi in 1985](#). “I came close to getting married twice. I miss not having a kid. People say, ‘You have many kids,’ but it’s not the same.”

Frederick Delano Thompson was born in Brooklyn on May 21, 1933. When he was 5, his parents, Hector Joseph Thompson and Evelyn Cethas, split up, and Fred and his brother, John, were sent to live with an aunt, Ira Johnson, who had a deep influence on the boys.

“Life is two things,” Mr. Thompson recalled her saying. “One, get an education, because once you have a college diploma nobody can take that away from you. And two, get involved with people.”

Fred followed both suggestions. He grew up in Bedford-Stuyvesant and graduated from Boys High in 1950. At City College, he began as a chemical engineering major but switched to history and graduated with a bachelor’s degree in 1955. He then studied law at St. John’s University, earning his degree in 1958.

After two years in the Army, he was admitted to the state bar in 1961 and opened a private law practice in Brooklyn. He worked mostly on negligence cases.

Aware of the city's shortage of track facilities for the young, and particularly concerned about limited girls' participation in intramural and interscholastic sports activities, Mr. Thompson followed his aunt's advice to become involved. He became a civilian volunteer with the Police Athletic League and then founded the Atoms Track Club. Soon he had dozens of members.

"Most of them are not from circumstances and surroundings that you would call ideal," he told The Times. "They have home problems, social problems, boy problems and many other problems. You can't just sweep these under the rug if you want to see them develop their talents and succeed in life. So I involve myself."

A decade later, in 1972, the landmark federal legislation known as Title IX, which banned sex discrimination in any educational program receiving federal funds, became law. It was the beginning of a sea change for female athletes. Before the law, about 310,000 girls and women in America were participating in high school and college sports. Today, federal officials say, there are 3.3 million.

Mr. Thompson, who handled legal cases for ABC-TV, the Federal Trade Commission and Madison Square Garden and was an assistant state attorney general from 1967 to 1969, gave up law practice in 1974, when he became the full-time paid director of the [Colgate Women's Games](#). Sponsored by Colgate-Palmolive, the games have been a huge, complex operation, often attracting as many as 20,000 competitors of all ages.

He remained the coach of the Atoms until after the turn of the century, when its membership began to dwindle, and directed the Colgate Women's Games for 40 years until his retirement in 2014.

Mr. Thompson, whose brother died some years ago, leaves no immediate survivors. He had Alzheimer's disease in recent years but remained at his home in Brooklyn, cared for by Ms. Forde, one of his best and most devoted former runners. A sprinter from Barbados, she competed in the 1972 and 1976 Summer Olympics and in the 1975 Pan American Games.

"Fred Thompson is one of those special people that a sport such as track and field needs," the Times columnist [Dave Anderson](#) wrote in 1979. "In the big money sports, a coach can always dream of going on to a lucrative career in college or in the pros. In track and field, there is no big money as there is in football or basketball. In track and field, the love of the sport is true; the dream is pure."



ADVERTISEMENT

NEWS

OPINION

ARTS

LIVING

LISTINGS & MORE

© 2019 The New York Times Company

[Contact Us](#)

[Work with us](#)

[Advertise](#)

[Your Ad Choices](#)

[Privacy](#)

[Terms of Service](#)

[Terms of Sale](#)

[Site Map](#)

[Help](#)

[Subscriptions](#)